

VZCZCXRO0370
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHLB #0515/01 1291011
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 091011Z MAY 09 ZDS
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4833
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3737
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3928
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 BEIRUT 000515

C O R R E C T E D COPY (TEXT, PARA 4)

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A/S BRIMMER
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/08/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [IS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: WITH DAS HALE, SLEIMAN LOOKS AT
POST-ELECTION SCENARIOS, GHAJAR, UNSCR 1701 AND API

BEIRUT 00000515 001.2 OF 005

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a May 8 meeting with President Michel Sleiman, visiting NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hale reiterated continuing U.S. support for Lebanese sovereignty and independence and for the voices of moderation within Lebanon. Sleiman predicted that the June 7 parliamentary elections would result in a close contest, with neither the March 14 nor March 8 coalition winning a decisive victory. If independent candidates did well, this could pave the way for a consensus government in which the President would hold the key to any efforts to block cabinet decisions, rather than the current "blocking third" held by the opposition, he said.

¶2. (C) On U.S. efforts to reach a comprehensive peace in the region, DAS Hale reassured the President that no deal would be made at Lebanon's expense. Sleiman cited UNSCR 1701 and the Arab Peace Initiative as the necessary framework for Lebanon, and encouraged Special Envoy George Mitchell to visit Lebanon soon to begin a dialogue. Sleiman expressed doubts that Israeli would withdraw from Ghajar, and complained about Israeli spy rings operating in Lebanon. He agreed, however, to think about whether Lebanon could offer reassurances to Israel that withdrawal from Ghajar would not be manipulated by Hizballah or otherwise backfire. End summary.

SUPPORT FOR LEBANESE INDEPENDENCE,
SOVEREIGNTY, AND VOICES OF MODERATION

¶3. (C) Upon arriving in Beirut on May 8, NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) David Hale, accompanied by the Ambassador and Pol/Econ Chief, met with President Michel Sleiman at his office in Baabda Palace. DAS Hale began by stating that the purpose of his visit was to follow up on the Secretary's

April 26 visit to Lebanon and thanked the President for making that visit a success. Sleiman agreed that the Secretary's visit was "very good," adding that "most" people in Lebanon appreciated the visit because the Secretary had limited her meetings to the President. If visitors see the President and Prime Minister only, he explained, this was the wrong message; either they should see the President only or a broad range of leaders. He noted that some Lebanese had objected to the Secretary's visit to the grave of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, but stressed that they were mistaken, since Hariri had been a personal friend of the Clintons.

¶4. (C) DAS Hale said his visit also aimed to take stock of the situation in Lebanon, one month before the June 7 parliamentary elections, and to express continuing U.S. strong support for the voices of moderation and independence in Lebanon, a message he also conveyed publicly in a press statement immediately following the meeting (see paragraph 20, below). He relayed that he had just come from Saudi Arabia, where he held meetings with Minister of Information Khoja, senior Foreign Ministry officials, and King Abdullah's son and advisor Abdel Aziz bin Abdullah, all of whom expressed their strong support for Lebanon, the Cedar Revolution, March 14, and President Sleiman.

¶5. (C) Sleiman appreciated the Saudi support, but cautioned that it was not in their interest to publicly voice support for March 14; rather, they should express support for all parties in Lebanon, and not imply that President Sleiman was part of March 14. He downplayed concerns about potential election violence, saying he expected them to proceed without problems.

BEIRUT 00000515 002.2 OF 005

¶6. (C) Sleiman expected the race to be close, with the split between the March 14 and March 8 blocs limited to two or three seats. Neither side would have a clear-cut majority, he predicted. If independent candidates are successful, they could win six or seven seats between the two blocs, which would help create consensus in the country and allow the President to play a larger role in decision-making.

PRESIDENTIAL CONTROL
OF BLOCKING THIRD?

¶7. (C) Asked about cabinet formation following the elections, Sleiman suggested that the new majority should receive 16 or 17 seats (assuming the new government would retain the current number of 30 ministerial postings), leaving 13 or 14 to be divided between the opposition's and President's choices. This would maintain a consensus government, but give the President a determining role in any attempts to form a blocking third. DAS Hale asked whether, if the current majority became the next minority, it would accept to be in the government. Sleiman replied that he would ask people close to March 14 but independent (like current Minister of Culture Tamman Salam) or close to both him and March 14 (like current Minister of State Nassib Lahoud) to represent him in cabinet. The real question, he said, is whether the next majority would let him control the blocking third.

¶8. (C) DAS Hale agreed that such a formula would lead to a more functional government. The current formula (in which the opposition has exclusive control over the blocking third) has led to government paralysis, preventing the government from moving forward with economic and other programs that can improve people's daily lives, he said.

REASSURANCES ON SYRIA, IRAN

9, (C) DAS Hale relayed that he had spoken with NEA Acting Assistant Secretary Jeffrey Feltman and NSC Senior Advisor

Dan Shapiro, following their May 7 meeting in Damascus with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallim, Presidential Advisor Shabaan and Dr. Mikad. The meeting had lasted four hours, he said, and the atmospherics were good, although no new ground was broken. Sleiman stressed that the U.S., as a major power, had an obligation to continue using the path of diplomacy.

¶10. (C) DAS Hale replied that there was a "sincere and strong commitment by our President" to do so. However, some were inclined to interpret U.S. engagement with Syria and Iran as an indication of a U.S. realignment in the region that would come at Lebanon's expense. The U.S. would continue, as the Secretary did during her visit to Lebanon, to stress to the Lebanese and others that the U.S. did not intend to use Lebanon as a bargaining chip. (Note: DAS Hale reiterated this message in his press statement after the meeting; the press, however, was eager to hear what "guarantees" the U.S. could offer, to which DAS Hale replied that this was the policy of the "highest levels of the U.S. administration" as well as the international community. End note.)

¶11. (C) DAS Hale stressed that the U.S. would continue to consult closely with its allies in the region as we work together to build a strategy toward Iran and Syria. This was also a theme of Defense Secretary Gates' and Special Advisor for the Gulf and Southwest Asia Dennis Ross' recent trips to the region, he said, and we will continue to seek our friends' advice. No deal would be done over Lebanon's head, he repeated.

UNSCR 1701 AND ARAB PEACE INITIATIVE
BEST FRAMEWORK FOR REGIONAL PEACE

¶12. (C) DAS Hale, noting that he also was working for Special
BEIRUT 00000515 003.2 OF 005

Envoy George Mitchell, with whom he already had made three visits to the region, also asked for Sleiman's views on U.S. efforts to reach a comprehensive peace agreement in the Middle East. The U.S. was seeking a lasting peace, he said, and understood that each country had its own context with respect to Israel.

¶13. (C) Sleiman agreed that UNSCR 1701 provided the best framework for Lebanon, but stressed the need to incorporate the Arab Peace Initiative (API) as well. The API, he explained, was perhaps the only issue on which all Lebanese agreed, especially because it excluded the possibility of Palestinian permanent resettlement ("tawteen") in Lebanon. Lebanon could not engage in negotiations without progress on the Syrian and Palestinian tracks. Sleiman encouraged Special Envoy Mitchell to come to Lebanon to begin a dialogue and hear views from all sides, including both the current majority and opposition.

¶14. (C) DAS Hale acknowledged broad Arab support for the API, calling it a key cornerstone of the U.S. approach. However, the Arab states also needed to show their willingness to take positive steps and contribute to a positive climate, he stressed, in the context of Israeli steps.

¶15. (C) DAS Hale cited Netanyahu's May 18 meeting with President Obama, followed by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's May 26 and Palestinian President Abu Mazen's May 28 visits to Washington, as key next steps. With the Israelis, all issues were on the table. By the end of May, the U.S. hoped to have a clearer sense of the way forward. DAS Hale agreed with Sleiman that Jordanian King Abdullah also was very positive about the prospects for peace after his Washington visit.

DOUBTS ON GHAJAR WITHDRAWAL

¶16. (C) Sleiman expressed doubt that Israel would withdraw its forces from Ghajar. DAS Hale responded that Special Envoy Mitchell had raised this with Netanyahu during their last meeting, and had been assured that the new Israeli government was looking into the issue and taking it very seriously. All indications were that they were ready to make a decision to withdraw, but were still looking at two issues.

Internally, the GOI was thinking through the legal implications of withdrawal in terms of the Israeli citizens currently living in Ghajar, with evacuation potentially the smoothest solution.

¶17. (C) Sleiman asked whether the Israelis planned to destroy remaining infrastructure to prevent squatters or other undesirable groups from moving in. Otherwise the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), with UNIFIL, should stay to prevent this.

DAS Hale responded that he would look into the question, but noted that the Israelis would need clarity regarding the timing of any transfer of authority to the LAF, an issue that was best left to the Tripartite talks to work out.

¶18. (C) Externally, DAS Hale continued, the Israelis needed to have a better understanding of the Lebanese reaction: would Hizballah use withdrawal as a propaganda victory or would GOL officials discredit the move as unimportant? A signal that Lebanon, perhaps in the form of a statement from President Sleiman, would welcome this step as a victory for diplomacy and the implementation of UNSCR 1701 would help reassure the Israelis on this point, he said. Sleiman agreed to "think about" the idea. DAS Hale added that the U.S. hoped that Ghajar could be a step towards future indirect dialogue between Lebanon and Israel, working with Special Envoy Mitchell.

¶19. (C) Sleiman also complained about Israeli spy rings operating in Lebanon, noting that the Internal Security Forces (ISF) had just arrested six more networks in south Lebanon. This was a violation of Lebanese sovereignty and

BEIRUT 00000515 004.2 OF 005

UNSCR 1701, he said, and gave the "resistance" an argument to maintain its arms. This was not a wise move from Israel, he commented. He believed the rings were real, he said, arguing that the ISF had no reason to "invent stories" and that he himself had seen the equipment used by the networks.

¶20. (U) Begin text of DAS Hale's press statement:

I just had the great honor of a meeting with President Sleiman my first meeting during this short visit to Lebanon. As always I am delighted to be back in a country that I spent many years, many fond years living in, in the past. The purpose of my visit here with the President was to echo the message that Secretary Clinton delivered in recent days and to state it succinctly: that is our support for Lebanon's sovereignty and its independence. That support is unwavering. And as we expand our regional engagement here in the Middle East, I'd like to emphasize that there will be no deals made at Lebanon's expense. There are no grand bargains in mind. We have an independent policy for an independent Lebanon, and we will never make any deals with the Syrians or others that sells out Lebanon or the Lebanese people.

And specifically I'd like to address the issue of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. The Tribunal, in our view, is not a political bargaining chip, and no deals will be made at the expense of seeing that justice is done.

The United States also remains very strongly committed to our goals of helping the Lebanese, in Lebanese-designed and Lebanese-led efforts, to help strengthen the institutions of the Lebanese state, whether it is civil institutions, political institutions, or defense and security institutions.

We are pleased with our robust support and hope it will continue in the future.

We also, of course while I am here in Lebanon, will be watching the election process as it unfolds, and I'd like also to reiterate America's strong support for the Lebanese Government in its efforts to ensure that the June 7 parliamentary elections are fair, free, and held without violence or intimidation.

The shape of Lebanon's future, including a post election government is for the people of Lebanon to choose. And for our part, the United States will continue to support a strong and independent Lebanon, and continue to contribute to building the institutions of this country. That's the best way to build peace and stability, as well as prosperity for Lebanon and the region.

Thank you very much.

Question: Do you think that Special Envoy Mitchell has succeeded in his efforts so far, and what is his efforts, impact on Lebanon?

DAS Hale: The President of the United States is very committed to doing everything we can to bring about peace in the Middle East, comprehensive peace. And George Mitchell was selected within days of the inauguration of the President, and I think that reflected the sense of priority, the sense of urgency, and the importance that the President places on seeing that we do make this effort as quickly as possible.

The focus of his efforts so far -- he's had three trips to the region -- has been to create a context for negotiations toward an early resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. And the immediate objective has been to work with Israeli and Arab partners, and our allies throughout the international community, to create the conditions for that resolution: establishment of an independent and viable Palestinian state, a two-state outcome, which is so important. But we also are focused on comprehensive peace, as the overarching goal for our efforts in this connection.

BEIRUT 00000515 005.2 OF 005

Question: You said that there is no deal concerning Lebanon, so what are the guarantees you can give to the Lebanese people especially that the parliamentary elections are so close?

DAS Hale: Well, the parliamentary elections, of course, are domestic elections. These are elections in which the Lebanese people will be choosing their future and we wish them well as they make those choices. On our part, the United States will continue to be, I think, a strong supporter for forces of moderation of peace and stability in Lebanon because we believe Lebanon has so much to contribute and benefit from those forces.

You know I've lived in Lebanon, as I mentioned in the beginning, many years at times when Lebanon did not enjoy that kind of peace and stability and that kind of support. So I am very pleased to see today that the nature of the international community's endorsement for what Lebanon has achieved is unbelievably strong, and I believe it is irreversible. I can only offer you the assurances from our top elected officials that they will not be doing deals at Lebanon's expense.

Thank you.

End text.

21. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.
SISON